

Eulogy for Arlen Specter
Delivered on October 16, 2012
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If my father were standing here he would take off his watch, place it on the lectern and say he's doing so to give you the false impression he would be paying attention to the time.

That was who he was: focused, yet funny; serious yet sensitive; commanding yet kidding.

At this point in the service, nearly everything has been said, but not everyone has said it. So please allow me to say this.

Our father loved my mother and his sons, loved Tracey and his granddaughters. He helped us succeed through boundless optimism and creativity. He supported our mother in her career in City Council and the pie business and the culinary arts. Our parents accomplished a lot more together, as a team, than either could have accomplished on their own. And our mother was the key to his success. She encouraged and supported him no matter what, in good times and bad, in sickness and in health. Joan Specter is a great woman.

Our father was so proud of my brother's achievements in nutritional science and medicine and psychiatry. He reveled in Tracey's leadership in politics, charity and motherhood. He was so proud of his granddaughters and their successes.

Our father did too much for me and my life to chronicle but I will just say this: with all of us his watchwords were always praise and encouragement.

He loved doing what he could for people and for his country. Arlen Specter was especially interested in the underdog.

This was rooted in the mistreatment of his father as a World War I veteran. It was also rooted in being raised in the Depression in very modest circumstances on the windswept plains of North Central Kansas, as the only Jewish family in Russell and as the son of a peddler.

And though he spent fourteen years as a prosecutor and cared deeply for the victim, he also cared deeply for the defendant.

This was carried forward to his 30 years in the Senate. Often his colleagues and others he encountered would find themselves in trouble. He would help them. He was the patron saint of lost causes. To help Bob Packwood or Trent Lott or Kay Bailey Hutchison or Larry Craig was politically unwise. But he liked to advocate for the accused, the down and the beaten. He would tell them, as he told many of us, "never let your face show how hard your ass is getting kicked."

He had an amazing will to persevere. I think often of 1980 when there was an open US Senate seat in Pennsylvania. He had lost three consecutive elections and his career in politics was felt by many to be over. I was 22 and thought I knew what to say. I tried to discourage him from running and while I didn't say it, it was plain I was trying to keep him from what I thought might be an embarrassment.

He listened. But he paid no heed. He ran and won and never looked back, winning ten consecutive elections.

He had a will to live a magnificent and productive life despite many adverse prognoses both medical and political. He paid essentially no attention to poor prognoses. He would say "I don't discourage."

His most productive year was 2005 when he was 75, very ill with Hodgkins disease, getting debilitating chemotherapy treatments, yet chairing the Senate Judiciary

Committee including successfully shepherding two Supreme Court nominees. All the while he would play squash nearly every day, making deposits in what he called the health bank. He would say "squash is the most important thing I do every day," which he later amended to say "squash is the only important thing I do every day." He passed squash and physical fitness on to his children and grandchildren, to their great credit and appreciation.

His will to work hard at seemingly impossible problems took him to nearly every one of the world's hot spots and to nearly every one of the world's despots, from Fidel Castro to Hugo Chavez to Muammar Gaddafi, from Yasser Arafat to both Assad's, father and son, and from Hosni Mubarak to Saddam Hussein. He did so because he believed very simply that to solve problems one needs to speak to the people who make trouble. He was confident enough in himself and in the greatness of his nation that he -- and we -- could work to solve the worst of our problems.

He was fiercely independent. He lived life the way he wanted.

He had no interest in money. Because he paid no attention to his bank accounts and statements, he had his life savings stolen by his secretary, whom I later saw him forgive.

He was mostly uninterested in creature comforts, except for an occasional steak, a nightly martini and a little Sinatra.

He was bored by the practice of law.

But he loved public issues and public problems. For those of us who wanted to see him elected and re-elected he seemed to care little what others thought of his viewpoint. His public life followed Dante's sentiment that the hottest places in Hell are reserved for those who in time of moral crisis preserve their neutrality. In a dark hour for our nation, he was willing to lose his seat in the Senate to cast the decisive vote on a critical issue and he did exactly that.

He faced the electorate 21 times, switched parties twice, won 16 and lost five. Remarkably, that's also the precise electoral record of a certain British statesman of the last century who coined the term, "Never Give In." "Never Give In" was Arlen Specter's mantra too.

My father loved being able to do something well other than the skill of the lawyer and the Senator. So, he was proud to have been in Ripley's "Believe It or Not!" at age four when he was appointed deputy sheriff by the local foreseeing sheriff. He was proud to have wielded an acetylene torch on oil derricks as a youth. He'd say that was great incentive to become a lawyer.

He was proud to pitch a knuckling softball for the DA's softball team, to do stand up comedy in clubs across the mid-Atlantic, to write a New York Times best seller, to call into WIP on Monday mornings and talk about the Eagles and Phillies and to comment on all manner of all things on Michael Smerconish's radio shows for two decades.

So what survives him?

He is survived by all of us who draw strength from the lessons he taught -- the importance of as he would put it "close inspection" and "attention to detail."

He is survived by his books chronicling the depth and breadth of his life experience, which rivals that of the fictional Forest Gump.

He is survived by our memory of his will. He would say you're never too far ahead to lose and never too far behind to win. He applied this to squash and politics and baseball and football.

What survives is his style: energetic and ambitious, brilliant and resourceful, self-aware and determined, all harnessed and concentrated on the matter at hand -- be it a case, a campaign, a personal problem, a debate or the making of a law or its enforcement.

These attributes and this intensity could and did accomplish much -- academic success; victorious debate in high school and college; moot court in law school; deep understanding, appreciation and enjoyment of sport including his precious Phillies and Eagles. These qualities enabled prosecution of the high and the mighty. These qualities enabled dialogue with the despots. These qualities enabled investigation of the complex and the arcane from Local 107 to Dealey Plaza, from the magistrates to the mayor, from Ruby Ridge to Khobar Towers. These qualities enabled the passage of a lot of legislation, most of it directed at helping the little guy.

He is survived by his will to fund and fight for a cure. From stem cells to medical research on Alzheimer's and Parkinson's and diabetes and yes to cancer, whose hateful mysteries he helped to try to unlock, he believed these wars were as important as our other wars. He knew that our battles for our health are waged on the ultimate battlefield, one where we are all the underdog. Cancer claimed him as it has too many. But one day it will be solved. And when it is Arlen Specter will be counted among the righteous that made it happen.

Aeschylus wrote:

"Even in our sleep, pain which cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart, until, in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God."

May we draw strength and wisdom from the life of Arlen Specter and may God bless his soul.